

Berthold Lowenfeld  
THE CASE FOR THE EXCEPTIONAL

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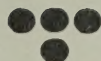


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By

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# The Case for the Exceptional

Berthold Lowenfeld

CHANGES in verbal identification are often significant expressions of changing attitudes. The group of children who are in one or another way handicapped has been named *abnormal*—*handicapped*—and *exceptional* during the past few decades. These terms are indicative of changes in attitudes toward the exceptional as a group. Speaking of them as *abnormal* implied that they were considered as different from the normal with a definite connotation of inferiority (a superior child was never called abnormal). When the term *handicapped* came into use it was almost always more closely defined by a descriptive adjective such as “visually” handicapped or “mentally” handicapped, thus limiting the inferiority to the specific handicap. In the change from “abnormal” to “handicapped” we recognize a tendency from the general to the specific. In recent years the term *exceptional* has become widely used, as for instance, in various departments in colleges which are designated as Education of the Exceptional, or in the name of the International Council for Exceptional Children. Webster’s New International Dictionary gives the following definition for “exceptional”: forming an exception; not ordinary; uncommon; rare; hence better than the average; superior; as exceptional talents or opportunities. The term “exceptional” is definitely detached from the concept of a collective inferiority and carries by implication the idea of being ex-

ceptional as an individual.

The concept of abnormality for a long time dominated the education of exceptional, then called abnormal or handicapped children. As a result, their education was based in scope and methods on that of the normal with special provisions supposed to compensate for or facilitate adjustment to the abnormality. An example will best illustrate this kind of approach. Blind individuals at first were taught to read regular type letters in embossed form. It was considered adequate to transform the visual patterns of the printed letters into tangible ones. Villey has described this lucidly as “speaking to the fingers the language of the eyes.”<sup>1</sup> The question whether the fingers might need an entirely different stimulus pattern than that which works best with the eyes was not considered during this early period in the education of the blind. It was the punctiform touch system of Louis Braille, who was himself blind, which freed the reading of the blind from the normal visual pattern. Its basic cell of six embossed dots was designed to be felt by touch and opened to the blind the door of reading and writing. Only when this insight is carried over to the field of the education of the blind in general, that is, when educators stop applying to blind children the patterns devised for seeing children,—only then can the

<sup>1</sup> Villey, P. *The World of the Blind*. New York: The Macmillan Co. 1930. p. 39.

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blind child live up to his real potentialities. Cutsforth uses a very expressive picture when he compares the blind child with an automobile engine: "The teachers, through an erroneous psychological concept, are compelled to regard the blind pupil as the equivalent of a seeing pupil except that he does not see. They conceive of the child as structurally incomplete, like an automobile engine with one cylinder missing. Therefore education must not only be education, but must also be a remedial therapy that will supply the missing power and also make the car sound as if it were really hitting on all six cylinders."<sup>2</sup> Instead, Cutsforth wants it understood that the blind child has a completely functioning five-cylinder engine. If we expect from exceptional children the same abilities and performances that we expect from other children we will be disappointed—each handicap has its characteristic limitations. We must, however, recognize that the exceptional child functions on his level satisfactorily to himself and to those who accept him and his handicap with an understanding of its real meaning and proportions. If this is understood it will not be surprising to find that exceptional children may be just as happy or unhappy youngsters as others, may succeed in their education just as well as others, and may adjust themselves to their environment just as completely as others. Their success in the personal, educational, and social fields is, as with all other children, an entirely individual problem. The exceptional child who is accepted by his family and his group, whose handicap is understood and recognized

in its real effects, and who is measured by the things he can do rather than by those he cannot do, has a fair chance for success in life.

There is no doubt that teachers of the exceptional, whatever type of handicap their pupils may have, want sound attitudes to prevail in the environment of their pupils and with the public in general. It was, in fact, largely they who promoted the change of term from "abnormal" to "handicapped" to "exceptional." But how far are we still from an enlightened approach of the general public to the problem of the exceptional individual. In searching for the reasons for the common misconceptions and the false emotionalism so generally prevalent we find that there are a number of fallacies which work in the minds of people against an objective attitude toward the exceptional. Among these the following three are of particular importance: prejudices, stereotyping, and wishful thinking.

*Prejudices* may be the result of various factors. Conditioning, for instance, plays a role when children are told again and again in fairy tales about the poor helpless cripple, or hear it repeated that all deaf people are suspicious. There is also often an uncritical acceptance of incorrect statements when people take opinions as facts because of a respect for the printed word or for the status of the person quoted, although his authority may be established in an entirely unrelated field. Another source of prejudiced thinking is in the individual's desire for dominance which may find satisfaction if others can be regarded as inferior. Prejudices are also effects of the tensions resulting from feelings of social and economic insecurity.

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<sup>2</sup> Cutsforth, T. D. *The Blind in School and Society*. New York: D. Appleton and Company. 1933. p. 50.



In *stereotyping* people generalize experiences they have had with one individual and ascribe certain traits to an entire group after they have observed them only in a single instance. A person who has seen a deaf man become irritated or angry proclaims with conviction that "all deaf people are very irritable or even irascible." The kind individual who offered his services to a blind man in helping him across the street and was rebuffed (maybe he was too clumsy in giving his aid or had the misfortune of meeting a blind individual not yet adjusted to his handicap) is liable to complain about the ingratitude of "the blind." Such statements as "all blind people are very musical" or "have a marvelous gift of orientation" are also typing fallacies. In this category we should also mention a kind of "black and white" thinking in which people think in extremes and ascribe either only positive or only negative characteristics to a group and to individuals belonging to it.

*Wishful thinking* plays a great role in statements like this: "The loss of one sense automatically sharpens the other senses." We love to think of nature as just and the compensation idea expressed in the before mentioned statement fits well into our wishful concept of nature's justice. Actually, none of the studies in which the sensory acuity of blind and seeing individuals were compared showed any superiority of the blind. This kind of wishful thinking also tends to absolve us of our responsibilities and helps to put our consciences at rest.

The same causes that are responsible for misconceptions about the handicapped are also responsible for those in regard to other minority groups, racial, religious, or social. What can

be done about it? Is there any hope that the public as a whole or a majority of it will become informed about the real facts; that it will acquire some knowledge about the complex problems of each minority? And even if it knew all these facts, would such knowledge do away with the causes that underlie the acceptance of prejudices and unfounded ideas about minorities? If we are to wait until public enlightenment and social security reach such lofty levels neither our own nor many coming generations will see this problem solved. The common man cannot possibly learn about the problems of all the minorities who live, let us say, in the United States—the problems of the Negroes, the Mexicans, the blind, the deaf, to name only a few. We cannot expect him to familiarize himself with such a multiplicity of problems. Rather than on *information as such*, our stress should be on the formation of *attitudes*. If this is understood we can limit our efforts to a few basic ones in order to promote a healthy change in attitudes toward the handicapped.

Among such basic considerations the following seem to me of particular importance:

First, *recognize each person as an individual in his own right*. This is a constructive approach which, if generally established, would not permit the growth of prejudices, rash generalizations, and misinformation. Children, brought up by parents and educators who stress individual evaluation of each person, will not as adults be prone to accept generalizing statements. They will understand that we do not know a person if we are only told that he is blind, or deaf, or a Negro. We may know from such information that he cannot see, or can-



not hear, or has a dark skin. But what his personality is, how intelligent he is, what his abilities are, and how we will like him, we can only learn by giving ourselves a chance of becoming acquainted with him. If we regard each and every person as an individual we will do justice to the exceptional as well as to the members of other minority groups.

Second, *accept the handicap in its real proportions*. Unjustified admiration as well as undue pity are reactions which greatly disturb the handicapped individual. What may seem to you a remarkable achievement may have become a more or less routine performance to the individual who has learned to live with his handicap. And what you may regard as a condition which you could hardly bear may be a phase of the handicap to which the other person has already successfully adjusted. Both undue admiration and pity can be traced back to the preconceived idea of a general inferiority of the exceptional individual. The contributions which exceptional people have made to the war effort should certainly open the minds of the public to their potential capabilities.

Third, *give them a chance*. We, as Americans, pride ourselves that the spirit of open-mindedness expressed in these words is one of our national characteristics. At the same time we cannot hide the fact that we are still very far from giving "opportunities to all." True, educators of the exceptional have succeeded to a remarkable extent in convincing the public that exceptional children have just as much right to be educated as all other children, and that beyond this the exceptional child has a right to an education "so adapted to his handicap that he can be economically independent and

have the chance for the fullest life of which he is capable."<sup>3</sup> It is all the more disturbing, in the face of this success, to find in too many cases that the trained individual has no chance to prove his worth because he is not given a job. Thus we permit our educational efforts to go to waste and, worse, deny exceptional individuals the satisfaction of becoming normally integrated members of their group.

What are the means by which we can hope to establish sound attitudes toward the exceptional? Constant alertness on the part of all who are concerned with the exceptional in seizing every opportunity to present their case should be taken for granted. But the efforts of these specialists will reach only a limited number of the people. The case for the exceptional must be carried on by all teachers to all children and by adult education to all the people.

All teachers on the elementary and high school level not only should by their own attitudes set examples for their children but should make all possible efforts to give their pupils an understanding of their responsibility as citizens toward their fellow citizens, including the exceptional. Classes of exceptional children in public schools are cells of enlightenment to the other children if the teachers know how to use them in presenting the case for the exceptional. Adult education, which is aware of its responsibilities in the field of religious and racial minorities, should include the problem of the exceptional and aim at the acceptance of sound attitudes toward handicapped individuals. While pas-

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<sup>3</sup> White House Conference on Child Health and Protection, IVB *The Handicapped Child*. New York, 1933. p. 3.



sions may often hinder progress where religious or racial minorities are concerned, nobody will object actively to giving a fair chance to the handi-

capped. If we succeed in creating healthy attitudes toward the exceptional, we will have made an essential contribution to our democratic life.







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